A New Islander Profile

by G. E. Mortimore

AVIATOR by ACCIDENT

CAPTAIN MAURICE BURBIDGE, one of the outstanding figures in Canadian aviation, is a cheerful, unassuming gentleman who lives in semi-retirement at Colwood.

He has taught hundreds of men to fly, including Grant McConachie, president of Canadian Pacific Airlines, and Carl Agar of Okanagan Helicopters. He flew over Germany in the lumbering, open-cockpit bombers of the 1914-18 war.

Among those who are acquainted with the history of flying in Canada, it is common knowledge that he virtually saved Canada's private flying clubs from falling to pieces. When he came to Canada from England to take charge of instruction at Edmonton Flying Club, there had been so many crashes that Canada's civil aviation authorities were gravely concerned for the future of private flying.

Under Capt. Burbidge's guidance, the organization of the flying club was tightened up and streamlined. The Edmonton club's efficiency and its safety record became an example which was followed by flying clubs all over the country.

In 1932 Capt. Burbidge was awarded the McKee trophy for the most distinguished service to Canadian aviation during the year.

Since that time he has been variously chief instructor of a wartime flying school, an airport manager, bush flyer and operations manager of a Latin American airline.

He says he wandered into aviation by accident, 43 years ago. As a boy of 18 he went straight from Pocklington school into the army, was commissioned in the artillery; then answered a call for artillery officers to volunteer for air observation in France. By the time he got to Air Ministry for his interview, the plan had been changed. The artillery officer had to be a pilot as well.

One of the first questions they asked was: "Can you ride a horse?" Equestrian skill wasn't a bad rough test for ability to cope with the balky, sensitive and meagerly-equipped aircraft of the day.

As it turned out, he spent the rest of the war as a flying instructor and bomber pilot, and did no artillery observation at all. Those who entered aviation at that time had the honor to take part in a period of spectacular growth.

In 1915, pilots were still taking pot-shots at one another in the air with revolvers. Within three years, some aircraft carried four machine guns and as much as 1,700 pounds of bombs.

The early wartime pilots had no parachutes, no self-sealing gas tanks. If they were shot down, they generally went down in flames. The crew had the choice of jumping out or being roasted.

"In some squadrons, the casualties were so high as almost to affect morale. A friend of mine, a flight commander, was nearly court-martialed when he told his commanding officer that he wasn't going to provide any more corpses for his mortuary. In another squadron, a day bomber squadron, the whole of the aircrew, including the CO, were shot down in enemy territory within three weeks.

"The casualties of training almost rivalled the casualties of battle. I learned to fly in a French Caudron, an aircraft with a top speed of 50 and a stalling speed of about 40. It had no ailerons; instead the entire wing could be warped to vary the amount of lift, to bank or maintain lateral stability."

The student sat up front, with no way of communicating with his instructor. He had no throttle; just the stick and rudder. When he went solo, he sat in the pilot's seat and used the throttle for the first time in his life.

"Somehow, my elementary instructor never taught me how to do a gliding turn. On my second solo, the engine cut out at 600 feet. I skidded around into wind and made straight for a field; overshot, hit a big hedge and turned over.

"I hung upside down in my safety belt, unable to extract myself from the wreckage. The gas tank was leaking and the fumes were suffocating. At this point, a farm laborer smoking a pipe came up to me and said: 'Be thou alive?' "

"I replied 'Yes, but put out that blankety-blank pipe, or I won't be for long'."

"If you took more than three hours dual before your first solo flight, you were in danger of being turned down as unsuitable. I soloed after 2½ hours, and began instructing as soon as

CAPTAIN MAURICE BURBIDGE

I got my wings, at about 35 hours. I hardly knew how to fly properly myself.

"Until April, 1917, when they brought in the Gosport system of flying training, I believe as many pilots were killed training as in action. Unreliable engines, which failed on an average, I would say, about every fifth time we went up, poor standards of instruction and frantic haste to push pilots through, all combined to take their toll."

With the opening of the Central Flying School at Gosport, several improvements came in. Speaking tubes were installed, so that instructor and student could talk to one another in the air. Before that time, the only method of communication had been a system of nudges and taps on the shoulder, kicks on the rudder, and conversation on the ground after the flight was over.

In the old days, students had done their flying in the passenger seat, with dual controls, but no throttle. A student went in the pilot's seat for the first time when he went solo. The Gosport system, on the other hand, put the student in the pilot's seat from the start, and accustomed him to using the throttle and instruments.

Before the end of 1917, training casualties had been greatly reduced.

"For a long time, anyone who showed a glimmer of ability was pressed into service as an instructor. I managed to get free from those duties, and joined a Handley-Page night-bomber squadron of the Independent Air Force (commanded by "Boom" Trenchard, who after the war became Lord Trenchard, chief of air staff.)"

Their job was to bomb the Rhine towns, Metz-Sablon in Alsace-Lorraine, Karlsruhe, Mannheim, etc., and (for some crews) Cologne. The endurance of the Handley-Page was about seven hours and speed about 85-90 miles per hour cruising. Targets varied from 50 to 200 miles from base.

They carried 100-pound and 500-pound bombs. Just before the Armistice they were provided with bombs weighing 1,650 pounds. They actually took off with 1,650-pound bomb-loads on practise flights, but never dropped them in action.

The crew consisted of the pilot, navigator-gunner, and one, sometimes two, NCO gun-layers. The Handley-Pages were armed with twin Lewis guns on scarf mountings forward (the navigator had to crawl forward through a small hole to reach them); one or two Lewis guns aft; and sometimes a Vickers firing downward through the bottom of the fuselage.

"Cockpits were open, and we had electrically-heated clothing, boots and gloves and electrical heating for the guns. I recall one trip when a fuse blew and all the heating equipment failed. Relying on the electrical heating, I wore few clothes. It was a chilly trip.

"In night bombing, we were lone wolves. Sometimes two or three aircraft were given the same target. They did not fly in formation, but took off at five or 10-minute intervals. Flying over Germany on your own, you felt that every man's hand was against you.

"We used to carry tiny compasses hidden in the pips of rank in our uniforms, and sometimes golden sovereigns with which to attempt to bribe our way home or pay for a hiding place if we were brought down in enemy territory; and an incendiary demolition bomb with which to destroy the aircraft, if it happened to be still airworthy.

"The German cities used to keep all their lights on until you got close to them; and then someone pulled a central switch, cutting off about three-quarters of the lights.

"We were ordered not to bomb civilian populations. Our targets were railway lines and stations and marshalling yards. If we did not reach the target, we were under orders to bring our bombs back—except in case of engine trouble, when we could jettison them.

"We did not worry much about navigation on the return journey. From Calais to the Vosges mountains there was a lighthouse about every 20 kilometres, each sending its own morse signal. We would fly southwest until he hit the first lighthouse, then run down the line of beacons to our airdrome. Each beacon changed its letter every night.

"On the outward trip, crossed searchlights were our signal that the weather had fogged in, and we had to return to base.

"When we were crossing our lines, the French searchlights, and ours, would challenge. We had to reply with the color of the night, fired from a Verey pistol—red to white, green to white or another of several combinations of colors. Returning from one raid, my navigator fitted the wrong color. He had omitted to remove all the old cartridges from the locker on the previous night. Anti-aircraft gunfire filled the wings with holes. It wasn't until I could get far enough back to give identification by pointing an Aldis light at where I thought the airdrome was, that our own anti-aircraft batteries stopped firing.

"One DH9A squadron suffered heavy casualties when our outward trips with full load of bombs. Owing to the weight of the bombs, they could not manoeuvre fast enough when attacked by fighters. They would sometimes send out formations with light dummy wooden bombs. When fighters attacked they would jettison these and shoot some of the fighters down."

There was a light-hearted quality about flying in those days. Capt. Burbidge remembers when a somewhat wobbly pilot came back from a bombing raid, overshot, and flew straight into a big canvas hangar, in which were two other Handley-Pages with folded wings.

"We expected to find the crew all dead. Instead, they were hanging upside down, unhurt. And we heard the navigator's voice, saying: 'I told you to put your ruddy engines on, and go around again, and all you said was 'Here we go again, George.'

"This pilot was sent home, where he ended flying VIP's around in a Handley-Page. He carried on the good work by crashing with a load of VIP's."

There were tractors to pull the aircraft around. But sometimes the tractors wouldn't move them. For such emergencies each squadron had 100 conscripts whose only task was to haul the aircraft around.

The Handley-Pages were powered by Rolls-Royce Eagle Eights. Certain parts of the engines were sealed off, and the RAF mechanics were forbidden to touch them. Several Rolls-Royce civil mechanics were attached to the squadron. They broke the seals and carried out the necessary repairs and inspection.

After the war Capt. Burbidge stayed in the air force.

When he was with 65 Squadron at Ford Junction, waiting to go out to India, a factory test pilot arrived with a DH10 to show the squadron's pilots how to fly the new machine. He had two of the squadron's best pilots aboard when the port engine cut out and the aircraft

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